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Student Community Advocacy Institute

Letter to the Members of the County Council of Montgomery County, MD
Testimony on behalf of homelessness in the County
April 10, 2020

Good morning Council members. My name is Delores McKoy. I am a Montgomery County resident who support a County budget that adequately funds homeless programs.

First, I want to express my gratitude for living in this County, one of the best in the Nation. Montgomery County sponsors many worthy outreach programs for its citizens. For example, a specific point of pride is our 311 program. I have gratefully used it numerous times. I also want to express appreciation for the County's success in getting most of its homeless veterans into wholesome residential living. The county does provide adequate funding and partnership to certain homeless programs. However, there is a gap between the shelter programs receiving county funding vs the emergency winter only overnight shelter programs. That is what I would like to see change.

The people throughout our County who have no place to call home represent vast human suffering, not only in cold winters, but year round, **not to mention during the critical health crisis such as the COVID-19 outbreak**. As a humanely oriented resident of Montgomery County. I want to suggest a novel way that our County could extend a helpful hand into the lives of its homeless without drawing further on taxpayers' pocketbooks. The County could set up additional partnerships with local helping organizations.

I propose that the County Council support the charitable mission of those organizations by identifying suitable nonuse county **spaces** where they could house and run yearlong programs to benefit our homeless with a full range of services equal to shelters **such as; the Interfaith Shelter, Rockville, a model shelter environment with adequate funding from the County**. They would be places where recipients of assistance would not be evicted each day but instead be educated for living self-sufficient lives, and are safer in such times as wide-spread health crisis. This would close the gap allowing equal shelter environment for all homeless programs.

There are many temporary emergency shelters such as; the House of Divine Guidance (HDG), a local nonprofit organization, makes a major contribution to alleviating misery through operating a **winter overnight emergency shelter** (December to March 15, of each year). But the lamentable reality is that when the County shelters' strict eligibility parameters or limited space causes them to

send their overflow to HDG, the County provides insufficient funding to help HDG add to its capacity and run a full year shelter program, or operational in period of health crisis such as this COVID-19 outbreak. If these winter transitional shelters that closed their doors on March 15 had the county support by acquiring the County unused buildings at affordable rate. It would have put the county in a better position to manage its public **health response to the COVID-19 pandemic**. The homeless who have nowhere to quarantine themselves are now roaming the streets, sick and without safe facilities for care and isolation. Public places where they usually survive by finding food, water, bathroom and rescue from inclement weather are closed. Now they are left where they are to suffer and possible experience in the streets of our county.

Lacking other means, HDG has been operating its overnight winter shelters at amenable houses of worship, moving every two to three weeks. But houses of worship do not have showers, so the women and children must find some other place for their personal hygiene—or do without. Of all HDG residents, 44 percent are children under the age of 12. The women and children are put out of the shelters at 7 a.m. Then it is up to them to find a place to spend the day. Their typical recourse is to go spend their time in public spaces—which do not open until 9 a.m. So for two hours in the morning, all they have is the cold streets. In wide-spread health issues such as COVID-19 when public places are closed for business. The homeless are left where they are on the streets of Montgomery County to suffer more and most likely will die on the streets. I would like to see the county unused buildings utilized as shelter housing for the homeless.

I strongly recommend and urge the County to consider a program that leases its buildings now empty at a nominal cost to volunteer organizations that independently address problems of homeless people. Then HDG and similar organizations would have a decent environment to provide homeless people with a stable living situation and provide staff members the needful space and time to work with the homeless. Homeless people need counseling to change their status. Having a reliable place could greatly improve the organizations' effectiveness in providing counseling and helping transition homeless people into jobs and a place to live.

The counselors who staff local shelters are limited by their lack of suitable places and sufficient time to work with families to help them succeed in getting out of homelessness.

The County's unoccupied buildings could become physical refuges for people who have no homes and the psychological antidote to desperation for our homeless citizens.

If County leadership were to try this idea, I believe that we would see a healthier Montgomery County and a sizable decrease in the homeless population.